'To the Captives Come Out and to Those in Darkness be Free…' Using the Book of Isaiah in (American) Politics?

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the way in which the book Isaiah, and particularly Deutero-Isaiah, is used in politics. For instance, a classic example comes from George W. Bush's May 2003 speech on the USS Lincoln where he declared an end to major combat in Iraq. In light of the way politicians use (or abuse) Isaiah in political debates, this essay considers the relationship between Bible and empire in Isaiah 40-48, arguing that in the midst of the brutal reality of empire in the biblical traditions there are a few texts that represent a counter or subversive rhetoric. I argue that these minor voices relate well to the recent developments in postcolonial interpretation that turn to 'love' or 'compassion' as a means to subvert empire thinking. Finally, I will make some suggestions of how this complex understanding of the interplay of empire and counter imperial rhetoric may be utilised in public discourse to offer an alternative vision of the world.

A THE BIBLE AND UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

In his recent book, *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics,* fresh from the press for the United States presidential election in November 2008, Jacques Berlinerblau (2008:78) writes that 'good use of the Bible is that use which in some way contributes to a politician winning an election, (or does not do any irreparable damage to his or her interest).' According to Berlinerbrau (2008:3), 'with his coded scriptural rhetoric and uncanny ability to wink subtly to his conservative Christian base' the Grand Old Party or Republican George W. Bush has been able to proclaim 'victory'[1] in two national elections.

Measured in terms of the following five criteria, as well as their success in back-to-back national elections, Berlinerbrau (2008:82-83) considers both

[1] 'Victory' in the 2000 election is of course for some a misnomer. The election in 2000 came down to 537 'hanging chads' in Florida (Berlinerbrau 2008:87), and was typified by a long and eventful journey through the United States Court system, reaching its final contentious conclusion in a Supreme Court decision.

George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to be 'masters of the craft' of citing scripture in their political speeches. According to Berlinerbrau, these criteria, with which he 'advises' political speechwriters, are as follow: (1) Citations must be *sparse and measured*; (2) citations ought to be *positive*, reflecting 'broad, uncontroversial American values' such as 'love of freedom, concern for the other'; (3) citations should be *vague* – using 'the Bible in an ornamental as opposed to substantive, fashion'; (4) citations 'should avoid intellectual and theological depth,' thus be *shallow* in nature. The purpose of these citations is to establish credibility, not to engage in 'complex metaphors and submerged symbols'; (5) citations should be *veiled* – references are best concealed in order to speak to the 'Christian supporters who know the Scripture like the backs of their hands' all the while not alienating those who are offended by the overt use of religious language in political discourse.

Granted these criteria proposed by Berlinerbrau may be tongue-in-the-cheek or ironic in nature, I have, nonetheless, several reservations with regard to them. For one, it is a question whether success in political elections equals 'good' Scripture practices. Moreover, elsewhere Berlinerbrau (2008:21) rightly points out that the problem with using the Bible in political discourse is that it is rather superficial – as he notes, 'the average length of a typical citation made by an American politician is exactly one verse.'[2] And according to Berlinerbrau (2008:44-45) the use of Scripture constitutes abuse if the complexity of the biblical witness is not pointed out; if the context of the citation is not taken into account, and if counter verses are not at least referenced – all good exegetical practices that lead me to believe that Berlinerbrau's analysis is born out of a cynical, though realistic view of the biblicisation of politics in the United States today.

At least the Democrats think that a contributing factor in the 'success' of the last presidential two campaigns is George W. Bush's ability to communicate with the Evangelical constituency that has played such a significant role in deciding the last two elections in the United States. Accordingly, 'the use (and abuse) of the Bible in politics is no longer a predominantly Republican undertaking'. Berlinerbrau (2008:77, 87-92) notes that already in the 2004 presiden-

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[2] An excellent example of 'sound bite theology' comes from a 2007 Democratic presidential debate in New Hampshire. When the candidates were asked at the end of the debate to name their favorite Bible verse, the candidates responded as follow: 'Senator Barack Obama: "The Sermon on the Mount, because it expresses a basic principle that I think we've lost over the last six years"; Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton: "The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I think that's a good rule for politics, too"; Senator John Edwards: "What you do unto the least of those, you do unto me".' It is interesting that Representative Dennis Kucinich's example does not even occur in the Bible, but comes from the Prayer from St. Francis, 'Lord make me an instrument of your peace'. See Jeff Zeleny, 'The Democrats Quote Scripture', September 27, 2007, http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/27/the-democrats-quote-scripture/.

tial election, Democrats like Howard Dean, Joseph Lieberman and John Kerry have tried to cite scripture and have failed miserably (Dean, even when asked about his favourite New Testament text, not only cited the book of Job, but also continued to give 'his version' of it, showing his profound lack of Bible knowledge). In his analysis of these particular Democrats' failure to effectively employ Scripture, Berlinerbrau (2008:92-94) maintains that the primary reason for their respective poor performances is that, because these politicians are not schooled in a religious tradition that regularly cites Scripture, they do not come across as genuine, but rather opportunistic in using religion to garner the now lucrative Evangelical vote.

However, my main reservation with Berlinerbrau's analysis is that he does not take seriously the empire language that has seeped into the president's language. In his essay, 'Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's Theology of Empire', Jim Wallis points out that there is a growing tendency in political discourse to think about the American dream or the American vision in terms of empire. Wallis (2005:138) says, citing William Kristol, chair of the Project for the New American Century, in their Project for a New American Empire, that it is imperative for the United States to 'accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles' (cf. also Keller 2005c:122-126).

It is further significant that this movement's claim to an American imperial identity (so much so that some policymakers even refers to a *Pax Americana* that eerily evokes the *Pax Romana* – 'peace', but a peace that is enforced by violent means by the Roman Empire) is given divine sanction by the present administration (Wallis 2005:131; Keller 2005a:23). Several writers have commented in recent years on 'Bush's religious mission'. For instance, Wallis (2005:138-139) describes how George W. Bush's theology underwent a significant transformation after September 11, 2001, as he found his mission in life, namely, 'to rid the world of evil'. Increasingly President Bush seems to be viewing his presidency in terms of a divine calling, believing that he is doing God's will.[3] For instance, in his State of the Union address in 2003, President Bush states the following: 'Freedom is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.' And in the final presidential debate in 2004 President Bush claims that a significant part of his foreign policy has been based upon the conviction that 'God wants everybody to be free' (Smith 2006:394).

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[3] Smith (2006: 397) argues that September 11 and the ensuing war on terror dramatically changed President Bush's presidency. His major concern became how he could keep people safe from further attacks. Smith notes that the President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri synod – told President Bush the following: 'You are a servant of God called for such a time like this,' to which the President responded: 'I accept the responsibility.'

A merger between God and U.S. foreign policy is particularly evident in the case of the war in Iraq. A classic example of the way in which George W. Bush (or at least his speechwriters) employs scripture to support his vocation of bringing freedom to the world comes from the May 2003 speech on the USS Lincoln where the president, appearing in combat gear, declares an end to major combat in Iraq.[4] In this speech, he thanked U S soldiers for not only serving America, but 'our cause', 'the highest calling of history', and continued that those who had lost their lives were 'fight[ing] a great evil'; fighting 'for the cause of liberty and for the peace of the world' – which President Bush considers to be 'American values and American interests' that 'lead in the same direction'. As he proclaims: 'We [that is the United States of America] stand for human liberty.' In his speech, President Bush refers to the other main objective of the war in Iraq, arguing that 'the liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror'. Making an unfortunate link between the tragedy of 9/11 and the ensuing war in Iraq, President Bush unequivocally states: 'The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001 and still goes on'. President Bush concludes his triumphant speech with the words from Isaiah 42:7: 'And wherever you go, you carry a message of hope, a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: "To the captives come out; and to those in darkness, be free".' (Kaplan 2004:19; Wallis 2005:122).

In terms of Berlinerbrau's criteria, George Bush's use of the first of the Servant songs in Deutero-Isaiah is brilliant – sparse, shallow, veiled, positive. However one should note that this 'exegesis' fails to note that the servant of God to whom the words of this particular citation applies, is not the macho man that appeared on the USS Enterprise. Instead in Isaiah 42:3, the servant is said to be 'a bruised reed' and 'a dimly burning wick' – thus scarcely the shock-and-awe calibre of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' that in President Bush's own words 'was carried out with a combination of precision and speed and boldness the enemy did not expect and the world had not seen before'.[5]

It may be that the speech writers tapped into the 'broad, uncontroversial American values' that Berlinerbrau proposes speechwriters use such as 'love of freedom', and 'concern for the other'. However, I would argue that the notion of the divine sanction of the mission is a significant factor in the choice of this particular citation. A key theme in the Servant Song in Isaiah 42 is the conviction that it is because God's spirit works through this servant, that he will not

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[4] For a transcript of this speech see http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/

[5] As Bush boasts: 'From distant bases or ships at sea, we sent planes and missiles that could destroy an enemy division or strike a single bunker. Marines and soldiers charged to Baghdad across 350 miles of hostile ground in one of the swiftest advances of heavy arms in history. You have shown the world the skill and the might of the American armed forces.' http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/

be broken or be quenched, but rather faithfully will continue his mission that includes freedom for the captives and those in darkness – the words relevant to President Bush's understanding of his/America's mission. By invoking this particular text, President Bush is proposing divine sanction for his operation Iraqi Freedom.

This tendency to conflate church, nation and God, so much so that 'God's mission coincides with that of the United States even when the United States is at war', constitutes for Nancy Duff (2006:186) a serious violation of the second commandment. She writes that the claim in the second commandment 'reminds us that we cannot locate God within human institutions of power such as the United States' (Duff 2006:191; Wallis 2005:145).

I strongly concur with Duff and other critics' unease of the way in which God and religion has been used in United States foreign policy. As biblical theologian, though, I want to raise another issue that may in part explain the relative ease in which this particular proof-text from Isaiah could find its way into President Bush's political discourse. We should not forget that much of the biblical corpus including Deutero-Isaiah from which President Bush cites, originated in the shadow of the empire. The exilic prophet writing in the name of the 8th century prophet Isaiah very much engaged in theological reflection within the *realpolitik* of his day. Particularly if one has a certain fundamentalist view of scripture, this characteristic of the biblical text lends itself to such application.[6]

In contrast to Berlinerbrau's analysis that 'good Bible thumpin'' ought to be 'shallow', 'veiled' and 'sparse', I want to propose that politicians today would benefit from a more complex understanding of the biblical text. Even though this complexity reflected in these texts may not be conducive to the 'sound bite' theology that seems to be the prerequisite for political speeches, I would argue that there may be an alternative way to talk about the Bible and politics that does justice to the complex situation in which we live. In the rest of this article, I will do three things. After making some comments about the way in which the relationship between Bible and empire functions in Isaiah 40-48, I will identify a few texts that represent a counter or subversive rhetoric in the heart of the brutal reality of the empire. I argue that these minor voices relate well to the recent developments in postcolonial interpretation that turn to 'love' or 'compassion' as a means to subvert empire thinking. Finally, I will make some suggestions as to how this complex understanding of the interplay

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[6] Keller (2005a:25) asks the following pointed question: 'Might it be the very doctrine of divine omnipotence that charges the halo with its holy electricity?' (As she explains earlier, the halo serves as a symbol of the current merger of the United States' military might as well as their 'self-perceived goodness'.)

of empire and counter-imperial rhetoric may be utilised in public discourse to offer an alternative vision of the world.

B DEUTERO-ISAIAH AND EMPIRE

The biblical prophets were experts in engaging in religious discourse with regard to the political events of the day. The 8th century prophet Isaiah viewed the invasion by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires as an integral part of God's plan – a means to punish Israel for their refusal to adhere to the covenant obligations (e. g. Isa 5:26-30; 10:5-6). And after the terrible tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, the prophet writing to the exilic community once more gave a theological spin to the political events of the day.

In this regard, Joseph Blenkinsopp (1988:84) argues that Isaiah 40-48[7] could be read politically, as a type of 'propagandistic manifesto' to promote the reign of the Persian emperor Cyrus who has uprooted the once mighty Babylonian Empire. Much like the famous Cyrus cylinder, the text of Deutero-Isaiah engages in religious polemic against the last Babylonian king Nabonidus (556-539 B. C.), who was infamous for treating his subjects with harshness.[8] Within the Deutero-Isaianic text, though, the political changeover is clothed in theological terms when *God* is said to be the sovereign Creator-Redeemer who chose Cyrus, who took him by the hand, and who lead him to subjugate the Babylonian empire. Endowed with royal titles such as God's shepherd (Isa 45:1), and God's anointed (Isa 44:28), Cyrus is entrusted with the mission of bringing the exiles home and restoring their religious cult. Well knowing that his proposal was not unequivocally accepted by all, the prophet engages in various rhetorical strategies to convince his audience that this unexpected rising 'political star' is indeed God's chosen one: the Messiah (Dille 2004:122-123).

The emphasis on Cyrus' role in God's plan for the restoration of Israel has lead some scholars to argue that the first servant song (Isa 42:1-4 together with its sequel in vv 5-9), which forms the context for the text from which President Bush cited, refers to Cyrus.[9] In this first servant song, God commis-

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[7] Blenkinsopp (1988:84) notes that the break between Isa 40-48 and Isa 49-55 is at least as clear as the break between chapters 40-55 and 56-66 (see also Westermann 1969: 28; Wilcox & Paton-Williams 1988:80-81). According to Blenkinsopp, Isa 40-48 centers around the political situation surrounding the victory of Cyrus who is portrayed as God's anointed in Isa 45:1-7 whereas Isa 49-55 has as its subject internal Jewish affairs – hence explaining the fact that Cyrus and the downfall of Babylon receive no further mention.

[8] Blenkinsopp (1988:84) speculates that the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah circulated during the last decade of the last Babylonian king Nabonidus (556-539 B C), probably after Cyrus' conquest of Lydia in 547 B C. See also Westermann (1969:3-4).

[9] The identity of the servant songs has been the subject of various debates, ranging from the prophet himself (Whybray 1975:71), an individual – the Messiah – who will be the ideal

sions a servant, filled with God's spirit, to bring about justice and freedom from debilitating circumstances, but without the customary violence and bloodshed associated with a battle for liberation. This interpretation may relate to Cyrus' commitment of reversing the harsh policies of his predecessors, who violently destroyed cities and sanctuaries and forcefully removed thousands of people, by sending home those exiled and by restoring the cults of the dispersed communities (Isa 44:26-28; Blenkinsopp 1988:85, 88).

If one accepts this proposal, and one should note that there are quite a few alternative readings that may be equally viable, it is rather ironic that President Bush's speechwriters have chosen to describe the president's mission in Iraq in terms of the mission of another emperor, Cyrus who according to Deutero-Isaiah has been divinely ordained. On the one hand, when one considers the fact that the context of the poem seems to highlight the non-violent nature of this new emperor's way in the world, President Bush's use of this text is especially ironic seeing that the US invasion in Iraq by no means was without military might and bloodshed as the song proposes. On the other hand, if one takes into consideration that the reality behind these words may be violent after all, the particular choice of text becomes even more disconcerting. One should not underestimate the violence that has accompanied empires throughout the ages. In Deutero-Isaiah we see glimpses of this violence when the violent downfall of Babylon is depicted in Isaiah 45:1-2 (cf. also Isa 47:1-3). It is further noteworthy that this violence is divinely ordained, so that it is *God* who levels the mountains; who breaks the bronze doors in pieces; who cuts through iron bars; subdues nations; and strips kings of their royal cloaks.

An empire-driven biblical text that merges God's power and sovereignty with what is happening in the geopolitical situation provides a rich source to be quoted from by any leader with visions of grandeur or with noble, or not so noble, dreams of 'saving' the world. Two concerns come to mind with the President's tendency to tap into the 'wonderworking power of God'[10] in order to provide divine sanction for his political endeavours:

Israel (Oswalt 1990:108), the exilic community (Wilcox & Paton-Williams 1988:83), or in the case of the first servant song (Isa 42:1-7), the Persian emperor, Cyrus. Blenkinsopp (1988:89) argues that the general context of Isa 40-48 and the pericope immediately preceding Isa 41:25-29 points to the fact that Cyrus is the one whom God commissions to fulfill God's redemptive purposes. An alternative proposal with regard to the identity of the servant would be that the servant in the first song refers to Israel, i. e. a broken people who shall not break but who through God's power will fulfill their original vocation – the promise once made to Abraham – to serve as a blessing to the nations (Brueggemann 1998 42. See also Linafelt 1997:201-203).

[10] See also the unfortunate application of a well-known hymn by the President in the 2003 State of the Union address that substituted the 'wonder-working power *in the blood of the Lamb'* with the 'wonder-working power' of the 'goodness and idealism and faith of the American people. Jim Wallis (2005:142) argues: 'The evangelical hymn is about the power of

Firstly, it is important to understand that the Deutero-Isaianic prophet who propagates imperial rule through his visions is writing to a dispersed people seeking through literary means to re-establish their broken world.[11] In this regard, Edward Said (2000:177) writes how an important aspect of exiles' recovery is to 'reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people'. Within this framework the emphasis on the sovereign God who uses empires to execute God's will is understandable. However, it sounds quite different when a superpower, which by its own admission possesses enormous firepower, uses religious rhetoric to give its foreign policy divine sanction or to connect with their evangelical constituency.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that the rosy coloured view with regard to the new emperor did not last. Much as politicians today fall out of favour after the election promises have fizzled into the stark realities of everyday life, the fact that there is no further mention of Cyrus in Isaiah 49-55 has lead scholars like Blenkinsopp to argue that one can sense a certain disillusionment with the rule of Cyrus. Even though he was responsible for the return of the Jews and other exiles, the exiles were disappointed that the Davidic dynasty was not eventually restored. Moreover, it soon became evident that the returning community in Judah would continue to suffer under the intrusive imperial politics of the Persian Empire (Blenkinsopp 1988:91; Balentine 1996:137-139).

The change in tone shows something of the complexity of using biblical texts that engage in politics as Word of God for all time. The political situations in the biblical text, then like now, changed fast. Leaders come and leaders go. In the light of this reality, the exilic community apparently looked elsewhere for inspiration. In the rest of Deutero-Isaiah there is a much greater emphasis on the city of Zion – the remaining servant songs possibly referring to the returning exilic community and/or the prophet ministering to this community (Blenkinsopp 1988:90-91).[12] It appears that the gaze has turned from the

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Christ in salvation, not the power of the American people, or any people, or any country.' Wallis gives a further example of this tendency to confuse God and nation: 'On the first anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks, President Bush said at Ellis Island, "This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind…. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it." Those last two sentences are straight out of John's gospel….. But again, the light shining in the darkness is the Word of God and the light of Christ. It's not about America and its values.' See also Keller 2005a:20.

[11] Blenkinsopp, (1988: 86) rightly points out that the community reflected in Deutero-Isaiah is a confessional community according to which new members are joined by coming to a personal decision (cf. e. g. Isa 44:3-5).

[12] This is by no means the only interpretative option. See also the suggestion of Linafelt (1997:203-206) that the identity of the servant shifts from the nation of Israel in Isa 42:1-7 and Isa 49:1-3 to the person of the servant in Isaiah 49:4-6 in addition to the remaining servant passages (Isa 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). See also Wilcox & Paton-Williams 1988: 88-91.

greater political arena back to the community, broken and despised, who is urged to serve as God's instruments in the world, effecting God's salvation.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the flirtation with empire is something that is part and parcel of our Jewish and Christian story. With regard to Christianity, Catharine Keller (2005c:113-114) notes that 'Christian theology suffers from an imperial condition'. She writes: 'Christianity spoke in the many tongues of empire – nations and languages colonised by Rome, before that Greece, before that Babylon which had first dispersed the Jews in imperial space.'[13]

However, an alternative way is possible in the midst of empire. The product of the theopolitical reflection in the biblical text constitutes a peculiar mix between theology done in service of those in power as well as theology that resists those in power. I argue that in the midst of the dominant story line that may be written in support of the empire, one finds a few minor voices – anti-imperial strands rooted in love – that interrupt the dominant discourse and offer glimpses of an alternative way of facing empire.

C A TURN TO LOVE

In his essay, 'Alien Witness: How God's People Challenge Empire', Walter Brueggemann (2007:28-32) faces the reality of living in the midst of the empire all the while finding ways to resist its hold on his life. Drawing a parallel with Israel who engaged in theological thinking in the midst of the empire, he writes: 'In Israel there were those who signed on with the empire.' However, as he (2007:28) rightly points out,

> [T]he ones who mattered in the long run were those who kept their critical distance, who regularly reminded the empire of that which it wanted to forget: that human power is penultimate, that there are limits to the power of the empire, and that the power finally is judged according to its enactments of mercy, compassion and justice.

With regard to Isaiah 47:6, Brueggemann (2007:30) argues that the Babylonian power is revoked by God who bestows the following judgment on Babylon who has overplayed their hand: 'I gave them your hand. You showed no mercy. On the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy.' Brueggemann

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[13] Keller (2005c:114-115) argues that 'the church until Constantine could resist the idolatry of the empire, of its gods of power, wealth, and conquest, in part *because* it could argue in its philosophical terms, not only witness in its tongues'. However, as she argues, 'the hermeneutical cost of absorbing the metaphysics of the empire was high'. As she notes earlier, the merger between empire and Christianity was 'a global gambit: that love might not get lost in translation' (:114).

argues that the empire should have been merciful to those who found themselves under imperial rule – in particular those who were at their most vulnerable.[14]

The emphasis on mercy and compassion as a means to resist the power of the empire is also evident in the number of female metaphors that is used in Deutero-Isaiah to image the divine. In Isaiah 40-48, which as we have noted may well be propaganda asserting the claims of Cyrus as the messiah, one finds two occurrences of God as a woman in labour that evoke connotations of new life that is to follow after the long and arduous labour of the mother-to-be.

In Isaiah 42:13-14, the metaphor of God as a mother in labour is juxtaposed with the metaphor of God as a mighty warrior in order to describe God's resolve to create a new future for the exiles.[15] And in Isaiah 45:9-11, the metaphor of a woman in labour is used in conjunction with the metaphor of God as a father who sires a child, and God as an artisan that shapes a pot from clay. Drawing on their common ability to create something these metaphors work together to convey to Israel the radical idea that Cyrus, the king of the Persian Empire, will be the means by which God will create a new future for Israel.[16] Furthermore in the chapter right after the 'Cyrus' manifesto, in the section where the gaze is turned to Zion and the exilic community, one finds in Isaiah 49:14-15 the metaphor of God as a nurturing mother who comforts her child. Responding to the laments of the exilic community who deeply feels that God has abandoned them, that God does not care, God is depicted as the ultimate mother who shows compassion to the devastated exiles.[17]

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[14] Brueggemann (2007:30) writes how this 'community is equipped only with narrative, story and poem, it proceeds by irony and by otherness. But the community persists long past empire, for empire in its arrogant autonomy has its day then ceases to be; empire never seems to learn that brutal expansionism has no future'.

[15] James Muilenburg (1956:64) has introduced the provocative designation 'the birthpangs of God', arguing that the woman in labour signifies that God is bringing a new creation into the world. Phyllis Trible (1978:64) develops this argument further when she argues that 'out of God's travail a new creation will emerge (42:5-13). Nature will reverse; history will alter; prisoners will be set free; the blind will receive their sight….God will cry out, gasping and panting, as she gives birth to these new realities in the world'. See also Gruber 1983:354-355; Van Wijk-Bos 1995:54.

[16] Sarah Dille (2004:116-117) argues that the point of comparison among these images is the ability to create a new thing. As Dille (2004:117) formulates this position: 'Reading the parent imagery of v 9 in interaction with the artisan imagery highlights an aspect of the metaphor that is hidden when these are taken in isolation from each other. That aspect is the contrast between human artisans who make gods and YHWH who makes humans.'

[17] Responding to imagery from Lamentations and Jeremiah, Isaiah 49 that portrays God's comfort in terms of a mother's love seeks to convince the exiles that God's compassionate love will be responsible for the new life that God will create by returning the exiles home (vv. 9-10) and rebuilding the city (Willey 1997:157, 188-191; O'Connor 1999:281-294).

As part of a larger project, I am interested in the rhetorical significance of these female metaphors; how they change how we think about God's liberative action.[18] For the purpose of this article, though, I will make a few brief comments with reference to the ability of these female metaphors that are used for God to evoke an alternative reality beyond the immediate political situation.

I argue that the very presence of the female imagery that is used for God in the empire-oriented discourse offers a means to resist empire while being in the midst of it. The metaphors of God as a woman in labour who captures the promise of new life and a mother who nurtures her newborn subvert the violence presumed and affected by the empire by drawing the reader's attention to life and to love.

In particular, these female metaphors play a significant role in decoding the power that is upheld by Deutero-Isaiah's vision of an all-powerful God. This emphasis on God's sovereignty is indeed a very important theme for the prophet, particularly in the light of his desire to address the serious theological questions harboured by the exilic survivors about God's ability to change their situation. However, as we have seen earlier, the theme of God's power became a leading theme in President Bush's explanation of the U.S. mission in Iraq – a tendency that leads Catharine Keller (2005a:29) to ask the following critical questions:

> A theology of omnipotence electrifies the halo of American domination. Where then does the idolatry lie – in the fact that the United States plays God, or as I [Keller] would put it, in the fact that it imitates a false God? Does the idolatry lies in our emulation of a divine superpower or in our confusion of God with omnipotence in the first place? A theopolitics of omnipotence is clearly at work in imperialism. But is there imperialism within the doctrine of omnipotence?

Keller has identified a key problem in using biblical texts in political discourse. The fact of the matter is that Deutero-Isaiah *is* advocating an image of a sovereign God, a God whose power is without measure (Isa 40:12). However, as she further suggests, a vital aspect in countering an imperial mindset would be to start decoding divine power. I argue that the female metaphors that

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[18] See my forthcoming book tentatively called, *God as Keener, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God as Liberator* that seeks to rethink the metaphor of God as liberator, showing how there are a number of female metaphors in the biblical text that may offer us the opportunity to clothe this very important metaphor with new meaning.

are used for God in the midst of the prophet's proclamation of a sovereign God can fruitfully be used to recode God's power.[19]

For instance, the fact that the metaphor of God as divine warrior is juxtaposed with the metaphor of a woman who is about to bring life into this world in Isaiah 42, challenges us to regard the traditionally military orientated metaphor of God as liberator in a new way, encouraging an alternative understanding of power that stands over against a viewpoint of power in terms of violence and bloodshed. [20] The metaphor of God as a woman in labour evokes the power of new life that counters or subverts the power to take life away. And in Isaiah 45, within the graphic violence that was present in the first part of the chapter, depicting a destructive deity breaking down the previous empire by means of its newest instrument, the metaphor of a mother giving birth is suggestive of another reality of new life that needs to be nurtured. The presence of the female imagery serves as a reminder, even though a faint reminder of alternative values, of a mother's power first to give life, and then to nurture that life. The power evoked by the female imagery for the divine is a power that grows out of compassion, a power that seeks to preserve life and is ultimately concerned with the needs of the other.

Moreover, in Isaiah 49 that occurs in a text that is characterised by a renewed emphasis on the city who is imaged as a bereaved mother, mourning for her lost children, the theme of compassion and mercy (related to the Hebrew word for *reḥem*) becomes a significant marker. The mother image and in particular the notion of God as the ideal mother interrupts the dominant story line that up till now has centred on the political events that are controlled by a sovereign God. In Isaiah 49 God's abundance of compassion and care transplant the violence as God 'mothers' the bereaved exiles. It seems that after the disillusionment in the political realm, when Cyrus did not live up to the ideal, there is a sense that an alternative way in the world is needed.[21] The metaphor of God as mother who calls God's children to 'mother' seems to offer a means to

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[19] It is important, as Keller (2005:30) argues, that one works toward 'heal[ing] the internally contradictory religious combination of love and power'. As Keller (2005:29) points out, the opposite of God's sovereignty is not God's impotence. The challenge is to find ways to rethink power so that it comes to denote a different kind of power. See the intriguing collection of essays in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine*, edited by Cynthia Rigby (1997).

[20] In conversation with Darr (1987:1994) who argues that that the metaphor of God as a woman in labour should be understood in light of its juxtaposition with the warrior metaphor, I argue that the transformation also works the other way around. The warrior metaphor is markedly altered by the presence of the female metaphor. The metaphor of God as a woman in labour evokes the power of new life that counters or subverts the power to take life away (Claassens 2008).

[21] Johnston (1994:32-33) points out that Israel is called to be a servant community, by means of compassion and even suffering to be salvific in the lives of others far beyond the narrow confines of Judah and Jerusalem. See also Hanson 1997:186.

resist the powers to be. What could be called a maternal ethic with its emphasis on nurture and care of the newborn Israel serves as reminder of the very possibility of an alternative world.

These glimpses of a counter-imperial rhetoric present in Deutero-Isaiah – in a text originating in the shadow of the empire – relates well to the development in postcolonial studies that turns to love as a strategy to resist empire. In her essay, 'For the Love of Postcolonialism', Catharine Keller (2005c:116) proposes 'a counter-imperial ecology of love'. Keller (2005c:122) demonstrates how postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Spivak makes the surprising move to turn to a discourse of love to capture their hope for the future. Spivak (1999:383; Keller 2005c:131), who according to Keller, in the past has not shown much interest in theology, makes the following proposal:

> We are talking about using the strongest mobilizing discourse in the world in a certain way, for the globe, nor merely for Fourth World upliftment. […] This learning can only be attempted through the supplementation of collective effort by love.

Spivak (1999:383) continues to describe this love as the slow, attentive, mutual, collective effort to change policies and minds with regard to 'laws, relations of production, systems of education, and health care'. As she notes: 'But without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact, nothing will stick.'

Keller (2005c:132-133), welcoming the initiative of post-colonial theorists who 'both mocking and mimicking theology itself', leap into 'a spiritual discourse of love', builds on the work of Spivak to explore the possibility of 'a theopolitics of planetary love – a divining love and, after all, a love divine' for those of us who 'are in but not of the empire', who are called 'to come out of the empire'. This incentive to offer an alternative to empire is based on a love that cannot be disembodied; a love that is a 'collective effort' that 'can only arise across and between boundaries – of nations, faiths, groups, genders'; a love that 'requires an almost inhuman surplus of care'.

D AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FROM DEUTERO-ISAIAH?

We live in interesting times. Considering the complex geopolitical situation, the mess in Iraq, the crisis in the housing market and health care, unemployment, rising oil and food prices, on the eve of a very important presidential election, one rightly may wonder whether the next U. S. president will be better (by the way Berlinerbrau [2008:3] notes that the, at the time, presumptive democratic nomination, Senator Barack Obama has 'the best Scripture game in town').

At the start of this article, I have suggested that politicians would benefit from developing a more complex understanding of the biblical text, moving beyond the proof-texting game, the 'Thumpin' it' of Berlinerbrau's analysis that seems to be norm in political discourse, to an alternative way of engaging the Bible. I propose the following (very much doubting whether anyone in or on his way to Washington will hear me): First, it would be a nice change if politicians will accept that the biblical text is just as complex as the world in which they do politics.[22] Part of such an understanding would be to be attentive to the reality of empire and the power empires exhume in both the genesis of the biblical text as well as the world in which we live. Being aware of the complexity and ambiguity in both the text as well as the world may be responsible not only for the fact that politicians may cite scripture with less bravado, but also that they may act more carefully, perhaps with a greater sense of doubt, which according to Berlinerbrau (2008:105) constitutes the 'brakes' that may prevent unilateral or rash behaviour.[23] Secondly, in the light of the serious challenges our world is facing that threaten the wellbeing of every single individual on this planet, I would suggest we are in desperate need of politicians who are able to tap into the counter-imperial discourse that is lurking well below the surface of the imperial discourse out of which the Bible originated.

Not to fall into essentialism, but as Catharine Keller (2005b:57) says: 'Let she who is without essences cast the first stone!' I wonder whether the female imagery in Deutero-Isaiah – metaphors that have originated in the midst of the empire, but that offer us glimpses of a world beyond power-hungry empires – do not offer possibilities for both male and female politicians to address the concerns of their constituents who are in desperate need to feel that politicians care, that they are not far away removed from people's plight and not only driven by money (e. g. the likes of oil companies, big business and special

[22] Barack Obama seems to exhibits something of a more complex understanding of the biblical text. In his '"Call to Renewal" Keynote Address', Obama has said the following: 'And even if we did have only Christians in our midst, if we expelled every non-Christian from the United States of America, whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? Would we go with James Dobson's or Al Sharpton's? Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is okay and that eating shellfish is abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon of the Mount – a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application', quoted in Berlinerbrau (2008:19).

[23] Berlinerbrau (2008:105) notes how Obama often remarks how American leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr were plagued by doubt. Berlinerbrau sees this doubt as a positive attribution, arguing that 'doubt is the braking mechanism, the internal check-and-balance' that will give pause to major decisions as well as will ensure that Obama will respect the separation of church and state that has been an important characteristic of American history and politics.

interest groups).[24] Such an alternative vision from Deutero-Isaiah that is rooted in, but not limited to, a mother's or a soon-to-be mother's love and commitment to life surely can speak to the challenges arising out of the geopolitical scene.[25] It is a love that as Keller (2005a:30) argues, 'desires our fullest becoming our genesis – as individuals, peoples, religions, nations'.

Impossible? Perhaps, but maybe our best hope in these dire times. As Keller (2005c: 133-134) concludes her essay, 'For the Love of Postcolonialism' quoting from Thomas Mann,[26] in *The Magic Mountain*:

> The empire will strike and be struck back. The love of the Song of Songs, the love that is as strong as death, may not conquer the forces of domination. But it may permit, between us, Thomas Mann's perfect clarity in ambiguity ... An ecologically sustainable and ethically hospitable earth remains maddeningly possible.

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[24] However, compassion or concern for the other is not necessarily a blueprint for good politics. It is ironic to see just how often President Bush has used the term 'compassion'. In his book *Faith and the Presidency,* Gary Scott Smith (2006:392-393) argues that president Bush has often stressed the themes of 'compassion, peace and freedom'. E. g. in his 1999 autobiography, President Bush argued that as the world's only superpower the United States must use its power 'in a strong but compassionate way to help keep the peace and encourage the spread of freedom'. See also his second inaugural speech in which he argues that that 'the advance of freedom depended on private character, service, mercy and a "heart for the weak"'.

[25] In this regard, Sarah Ruddick has utilised the notion of 'maternal thinking', that is, a systematic reflection on the actions executed by mothers in the broad sense of the word (she calls her husband her 'co-mother'). Ruddick (1989:49) defines 'mothering' as 'a sustained response to the promise embedded' in the creation of a new life. This commitment to 'mothering' includes for Ruddick (1989:65-102) among other things, a desire to preserve life and to foster growth. Moreover, maternal thinking also has broader ethical implications. Ruddick (1989:57, 81) argues that this commitment to mothering may naturally be extended into 'a commitment to protect the lives of "other" children, to resist on behalf of children assaults on body or spirit that violate the promise of birth'. So she argues that 'the effort of world protection may come to seem a "natural" extension of maternal work'– thus explaining the subtitle of her book: 'towards a politics of peace'.

[26] Thomas Mann writes: 'The result is perfect clarity in ambiguity, for love cannot be disembodied even in its most sanctified forms, nor is it without sanctity even at its most fleshly … love is our sympathy with organic life, the touchingly lustful embrace of what is destined to decay…' (p. 590, quoted in Keller 2005c:132).

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